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MEDITATION, PRECEPT AND PRACTICE

There are three foundations for Zen; these are first and foremost Meditation, Precept and Practice. People very often do not understand clearly the relationship between these three and I get many questions about this. Also there are a large number of people who mistake the emphasis that Zen has put upon these and in so doing miss their direction. Zen training has always primarily emphasized meditation, this in recent times in the West has been greatly misconstrued by some meaning that precepts and morality can be ignored and the hard work of practice in daily life can be avoided. Such people run grave dangers - Zen is never licence. Because of this, I hope in this article to show how these three interrelate and are in truth facets of Zen training. Without all three there is no training and, therefore, no Zen. A lopsided view on the other hand can also be dangerous, and it is important to understand the balance between them.

Meditation has always been said to be the foundation of Zen. The very word Zen is derived from the Sanskrit word for meditation and it is true that many masters have said throughout the ages that one could attain one's goal for the first time through meditation alone. But this was said by masters teaching in monasteries where practice and morality were mandatory. It was to correct the view that is all too common in religion that the mere attempt at following the precepts without the insight given by meditation leads to a sterile and unproductive form of training. This is the attempt that we so often all make to become "sinless." We forget the one thing that we are, that is human and therefore frail and fallible. Meditation gives us the insight to see how to live and the unity to do so. Many people think that the important part of meditation is insight, this is not so, the important part is unity. When we are at one with ourselves and the rest of the world without in any way being caught by passivity then we will quite naturally lead a pure life. What do

I mean by a pure life? Well a life that is purely life it is freed from the incumbrances of dreads and fears that we tend to put upon it unnecessarily - a life that is freed from the petty anxieties that we constantly beat ourselves with - that is freed from the clogging veil of worrying thoughts and bickering mental gossip - that freed from hatred, anger, grasping and ignorance in the sense of stupidity that is to say deliberately ignoring things. We all tend to have considerable amounts of the qualities in ourselves. Through meditation we will come back to our own true nature, to our hearts, to our original faces - whatever you care to call it. Here we will see things clearly and act accordingly quite naturally.

Meditation therefore is the foundation stone but it must be true meditation. Too many people come to meditation in order to gain things for themselves, they seek for selfish things and not for the truth, they seek for more will power so they are better able to dominate people they seek for a better facade so that they are better able to keep the world at bay. This is meditation going in the wrong direction. All who come to meditation have motives that contain elements that are bad, anybody who had completely pure motives would probably not need to come in the first place. It is because of this that the Precepts become so important.

Many people these days have problems with the formalised forms of morality. Because of this I would ask you to stop now and think of any list you know, the Precepts, The Ten Commandments etc and go through them one by one and not ask yourself whether you agree with them but whether you agree with their opposite. Do you think that it is right to kill? Do you think that it is right to steal, lie?...no? Then what is the problem with accepting the list? I think probably this is as much a matter of upbringing as anything else, an enormous pity as it clouds so much of what is of great importance in our training.

Morality is just how to live in reality with things as they are not as we might imagine or try to take them to be. If we stop and look we see that most if not all

the time we do not think and feel about others in the same way that we feel about ourselves. If we did, if we felt others to be truly just like us then we would no more conceive of killing them or stealing or lying than we would of doing so to ourselves. It becomes quite clear that somebody who is moral in the true sense of the word is someone who has arrived through meditation at the world as it is, where there is no longer any feeling of alienation where we do not feel that some people are inferior to others and that the universe revolves around us in particular. In the meantime before we arrive at this view morality serves a very, very important and useful function. Morality is not something to be followed by rote, the precepts are there for our guidance and I emphasise that part of the word that says guide, then if we let them they will guide us back to our hearts and to the heart. For all things so that we may see things not through our upside down view that we have now but in a more open and expansive way without a cloud of selfishness in front of us as we really are.

So do not think that when you are not breaking the precepts you are acting correctly - this is not true. To act correctly in this sense is to act from your heart and it is possible to keep the precepts in such a manner that you are using them to keep you apart from your heart. This is the hypocritical and pharisaical attitude that has a tendency to creep into all religion and into our own practice and something that must be rooted out whenever we see even the slightest trace of it. The precepts are most useful when we can take them and see that whenever we break them we have nearly always lost touch with our heart. In our lives they are a kind of rule of thumb. Everytime we find ourselves breaking one of the Precepts we should stop and consider our action because it is not automatically true that what we are doing is wrong but it may be said that very rarely will we find that it is not so. Here is then their true purpose, to show us when we are making mistakes so that we can then lay down our mistakes and return again to what is real and true.

This of course has a slightly negative flavour to

it and so in most religions you will also find some form of positive precepts - in Christianity the Beatitudes - in Mahayana Buddhism the Paramitas, the five perfections of generosity, discipline, patience, energy, meditation and wisdom. In Zen we tend to emphasise these very little for it is enough that if we get a true balance between our meditation, morality and practice we will not need them.

What about this balance that I have been talking about between meditation and morality, where can it be found and how can it be arrived at? Well whenever you find that you are about to or are in the process of or just have broken the Precepts, stop, put yourself in a meditative frame of mind and go on from there, you will then be able to see more clearly if your actions were correct or not. It is never possible to know absolutely whether what you are doing is right because we cannot foresee all the consequences of our actions. But then if we regain that meditative frame of mind and work with energy we will more clearly be able to act correctly. The correct form of action is not Right in any puritanical sense of the word - classically in the Mahayana sutras right action is defined as neither right nor wrong. The balance between meditation and morality must always be that morality shows you have lost the ground of meditation if you cannot then get back to that or if your way ahead is unclear morality then gives you a useful rule of thumb to work out the situation with. This is its secondary use its most important use is to point you back to your heart. Lazy people throw away the primary and only keep the secondary use this is to get attached to the form and to throw away the substance, then it is that you will start slipping back into that horrible puritanical attitude that creeps up on us all sometimes.

This leaves us with practice, what is practice? In the normal sense people understand practice in the sense of some religious practice but in Zen we consider everyday life as our religious practice. So what makes this religious practice rather than our ordinary everyday life? Well to live our life based on meditation and morality is not enough we must also have activity, without this

there is no movement and the one thing that must be understood is that religion is about life and life is never anything but dynamic. At its very roots there may be a stillness and peace but at its surface there is forever movement. Many people come to religion in search of passivity and it is true that in the early stages of meditation only it does appear to be passive. This is only while we disentangle ourselves to see more clearly the direction in which we must go. When we can see the direction, when we have found our hearts, for that is the only part of us that really knows the direction, when we have found that then we must act from our hearts in everything that we do throughout the day. This is difficult and something that we will lose sight of time and time again. Do not worry this is what meditation and morality are there for, meditation to lead us back and morality to show us when we have gone wrong and need to be lead back. Morality also when we get confused and lost acts as a crutch to help us on our way, as a guide when we cannot see what to do by telling us what to do. This must all infuse our life with great energy and dynamism so that we come back to our meditation with great vigour so that we can see more clearly our heart and the heart of all around us so that we act in a pure and better way, growing in our practice in our activity in daily life and this is the constantly deepening process, it will never end until we are perfect and we will never be that because we have never left it. G.K.Chesterton said that we have not left the Garden of Eden only our eyesight has changed. This I think is true but we will never regain our 'eyesight' without great efforts. It has always been those who made the greatest efforts who got the furthest in Zen, never ever forget this and then in your daily life make every action count. This does not mean that you must always be busy but when you rest, rest! Far too often when people are working they are thinking about resting and when they are resting they are thinking about working. When you work put your whole heart into it and do it with all your might, striving strenuously to keep your mind in meditation and then your work will become the greatest meditation practice of all. When you rest, rest when you

sleep, sleep when you eat, eat - every action has the possibility of being this kind of practice. In Zen we include everything from getting up in the morning to the last yawn and stretch when going to bed at night. Everything must be imbued with this spirit, only if we do this are we acquiring the balance that is so necessary.

Do not expect to be able to do this straight away, it will take time but it is possible. It is possible for anyone it only needs persistence and effort but with it comes joy and openness. Here I would like to offer a word of warning, always remember your humanity - man is basically a warm hearted creature but he is also fallible. Never worry about your mistakes, they are part of the process of learning. Soon if you practice strenuously you will learn how to value them because they will teach you about the true path even more clearly than when things are going 'right.' So make friends with your faults, they are going to be with you for a long time - do something about them but understand that they will lead you to your goal.

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Delusions as regards religion vary from person to person and from country to country depending largely on personality and conditioning. England being basically a cold nation will undoubtedly find this a considerable barrier to spirituality coupled with this is the fact that until now almost the only contact with Zen for the average westerner has been in book form, which so often leaves one with so many preconceived ideas impregnated on one's brain that it makes it even harder to sit still and trust one's own heart let alone a teacher.

Monasteries exist for people to find their own inner responsibilities and to find too the strength to live them out. This is the heart of training and enlightenment of going on, becoming Buddha. "The more one climbs the mountain the higher the mountain becomes." All this of course has been said many times before and seems very straight forward and in fact is. The only thing that it

requires is a sincere commitment to it and anybody who has genuinely trained in religion will know that this is always hard for never is there a definite thing to hang a coat of commitment onto. Indeed the king of the fishes said when he discovered the void, "If only I could find somewhere to pin this label onto." Now because of this great difficulty it is easy to remain lazy and cold instead of blossoming in Zen this is called quietism and is the scourge of monasteries and religions. It spreads like wildfire and the unfortunate thing is that it comes under the guise of religion.

A very big misfortune is that books so often are either appallingly translated or not fully written. The number of books written about monks having a 'satori' after a flick of a bamboo, or a smack from the master and not a mention of the training done before or afterwards leads us to believe that Zen masters are incredible magicians here to perform miracles on our minds for us, to take away all our troubles, without us having to lift a finger, or commit ourselves in any way at all. This is of course absolute rot and does Zen a grave disservice. The master disciple relationship is a very personal relationship and by no means an easy one the standards demanded by masters are very high and any mistakes are heavily censured which means that the faith and trust has to be greater than ego doubts and fears if one is to progress. And so the master does help and does reveal more, but only to those who are ready to walk. The only way through out of the mess that one is in is through hard work and any attempt to avoid this is quietism - stagnating on the vibes of a monastery or trying to conjure up a quiet blissful repose.

Unfortunately though for these people quietism is not the end of suffering, laziness is not the answer to life's problems. The embracing mind is the joyfull mind, but one discovers the way through one's own efforts, masters may point and shout but disciples walk it and occasionally run it. And so if one wants to truly grow Zen try not to look for serenity and joy, look to sincerity and commitment and work hard at integrating the workings

of one's heart into one's daily life making Zen into a living religion that can only be deepened to be made real and can be made real only by oneself. And instead of looking to teachers for the answer looking within to one's koan and then ask for their guidance.

To have an empty head
and call it enlightenment
is like looking to the sky
and calling it daily life.

Hofuku Hughes.

PRIORY NEWS AND EVENTS.

Retreats. The August retreat was fully booked for over a month before the start, though there are still a few places left on the September retreat. Retreats later this year will be held on September 20-28th and December 13th to 21st. There will be week-end retreats on October 11th and 12th, November 8th and 9th, and 29th and 30th.

Spode House Retreat Daiji and Daishin went to Spode House again this year for an inter religious Zen / Catholic retreat. The retreat was very well attended with a large proportion of religious - everyone seemed to get a great deal from it and we hope to have a similar retreat again next summer.

New Building.

The coal mines that were discovered under the site have now been fully exposed and we are now engaged in removing the topsoil and levelling the site.

Garden.

The vegetable gardens are doing quite well this year- a warm spell early on helped to get things going and we are beginning to get an idea of what varieties will survive Throssel conditions.

Animals

We have been given a dozen ducklings of the same variety as Donald who is very happy to have a dozen wives and so in a month or two we should be self sufficient as far as eggs are concerned.

Throssel Hole Priory Journal.

The Throssel Hole Priory Journal is published bi-monthly with six issues a year. The subscription rate is per annum. Please send your subscription to:-

Throssel Hole Priory,
Carr Shield,
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Northumberland NE47 8AL.

Selling Water By The River

The Priory is selling copies of Kennett Roshi's book "Selling Water By The River A Manual of Zen Training." The book includes Kennett Roshi's explanation of Zen meditation, training and Koans, as well as translations from Dogen and Keizan, the two great founders of Soto Zen in Japan. Also included are the scriptures and ceremonial of Soto Zen, much of which is used here at the Priory.

Prices including postage and packing are:-

Paperback £1.25 (temporarily out of stock.)
Hardback £2.50.

The Priory is also selling booklets on Zen Meditation, these contain extracts from Kennett Roshi's book, extracts from some of her lectures and basic information on how to meditate, how to make your own meditation cushions and benches etc. Price including postage 40p.

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